

U.S. senator: China must allow formal U.N. assessment of North Korean refugees

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BEIJING (AP) - Appealing for compassion for North Koreans fleeing "horrific persecution," a U.S. congressman on Wednesday called on China to let U.N. officials visit to determine whether they qualify to be treated as refugees.

Sen. Sam Brownback spent three days this week on the Chinese side of the North Korean border meeting local officials and discussing the plight of the North Koreans. It was an unusual step for China to let a foreign official visit the area, but might have been aimed at trying to defuse criticism of its handling of asylum-seekers.

Thousands of North Koreans fleeing famine and repression have slipped across the border in recent years and live in hiding. China has rejected appeals to treat them as refugees, insisting they are illegal economic migrants.

"China cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering, persecution and execution of the citizens of its neighbor," Brownback, a Kansas Republican, said at a news conference at the U.S. Embassy.

"China can influence North Korea more than any country in the world and has a clear moral obligation to do so."

Brownback, who returned to Beijing on Tuesday, said he was denied access to North Koreans who had crossed over to China. He said activists who work with the fleeing North Koreans turned down requests to talk to him because they were "too fearful of reprisals."

China launches periodic sweeps to pick up fleeing North Koreans and has punished people who help them. A group of seven people, including a Korean-American, are on trial in the border city of Yanji on charges of smuggling North Koreans into China. According to court officials, they face up to seven years in prison if convicted.

"I call on the Chinese government to allow the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees to formally and officially assess the situation," Brownback said.

Despite a Chinese promise in 1995 to let U.N. officials visit the border area, the UNHCR said last month that its requests for access have been denied. A UNHCR spokesman said last month that "some of the North Koreans may be refugees" and appealed anew to visit the area.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry had no immediate comment Wednesday.

Beijing is obligated by treaty with its North Korean ally to send home asylum seekers. But China hasn't done so in cases that have become public, possibly worried about a foreign backlash.

Since March, more than 100 North Koreans have been allowed to leave for other countries after seeking asylum in foreign embassies and other offices in China. Most go to South Korea.

Brownback cited testimony given to U.S. legislators in Washington and said persecution, executions and "government-manipulated starvation" are being carried out in the North, which relies on foreign food aid.

"I call on the North Korean government to cease and desist these activities," he said. "They must begin to comply with international norms of basic human rights. They must begin to treat their people as people and not as faceless animals."

The senator, who has made three previous trips to China, said there has been a "minimal change" in Beijing's official attitude toward the situation.

"At least today there is an admission that there are North Koreans who are horribly treated in North Korea, there is an admission that there is terrible deprivation in North Korea," he said.

"These stories continue to come out in large quantities about horrific persecution, execution, treatment of the North Korean people."